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AUTHOR McCurdy, Jack
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ABSTRACT

The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) has begun a career counseling program for student-athletes to help them explore and plan for non-athletic careers. Because few athletes ever become professionals and because they are isolated from the mainstream of university life, UCLA officials believe that a special effort is needed on their behalf. The program reflects a change in atmosphere at the university towards encouraging athletes to become solid students and preparing them for post-university life. The four-year process involves identifying marketable skills, choosing career fields, taking internships and part-time jobs, and developing job search and interview skills. One unintended benefit of the program has been a significant improvement in the grades of the participants. (DC)

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Athletics

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UCLA Counseling Athletes on Careers After Their Glory Days Are Over

By JACK McCURDY

LOS ANGELES

The University of California at Los Angeles has begun to help its student-athletes prepare for productive lives once their glory days are over by developing a counseling program aimed specifically at encouraging them to explore and plan for non-athletic careers.

The new program, offered by the university's placement and career-planning center, aims at awakening athletes to the fact that few will ever make it in professional sports, and that even those who do will last only four or five years, on the average.

"The perception of these kids is, 'I don't have to worry about these things,'" says Judith R. Holland, senior associate director of the U.C.L.A. department of intercollegiate athletics.

"Most [male] athletes come to college and, if they play football or basketball, they say they are going to the pro's," says Montel Hatcher, a U.C.L.A. basketball player. "They don't make it, and that's the problem. What do they do? They go back and hang out on the streets. I know a few."

Problem Different for Females

For female athletes, the problem is different, since opportunities to play professionally are rare. Some aspire to become coaches, whose skills are in demand at colleges and high schools. But most do not prepare for anything, Ms. Holland says.

Many other college students do not think about career goals, either, but U.C.L.A. officials believe athletes constitute a special case because their sports activities tend to isolate them from the educational life of the university, and the demands on their time for practice and competition cut them off from many other activities.

"There's something about athletics that conjures up a picture of a kid driving around in a Mercedes with all those perks," says June E. Millet, director of educational career services at the placement center. "I don't see it. We take from them more than we give them. I look at

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PHOTOGRAPH FOR THE CHRONICLE BY NORM SCHINDLER

Basketball players Michelle McCoy and Montel Hatcher look for internships posted on a job board in the U.C.L.A. career-planning center.

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what we're doing for them as students. If we're not giving them what they need to grow, we are depriving them."

For example, she says, athletes were normally not able to avail themselves of the career center's services: By the time afternoon practice was over, the center had closed. So the career-planning program was scheduled for the evening, when athletes had more free time.

U.C.L.A. officials are enthusiastic about the new program. "This is one of the most exciting things we have here," says Peter Dalis, who has just taken over as the university's athletic director. In the past, Mr. Dalis says, the university has been "somewhat derelict" in its failure to offer career counseling to athletes.

The counseling program, he notes, is part of a larger effort by U.C.L.A. to encourage athletes to become solid students as well as standouts in their sports.

During the last three years, Ms. Holland says, spending on the counseling, tutoring, and academic advising of athletes has more than tripled in the athletic department, and the number of administrators assigned to the area has been increased from one to four. The university is now also contacting athletes who left without graduating and offering assistance toward obtaining their diplomas, she added.

One of the new counselors is Charles L. Parish, an assistant athletic director who initially suggested career-planning sessions for athletes. He is the first member of the department with a vocational-education as well as an athletic background.

'New Atmosphere'

Such efforts indicate "a new atmosphere in the athletic department," Ms. Holland says. She and others say the new attitude grew out of the penalties levied by the National Collegiate Athletic Association against U.C.L.A. for recruiting infractions as well as growing concern throughout higher education that athletes were being "exploited" for

their sports ability with less concern for their educational accomplishments. (In 1981 the men's basketball program was put on probation for two years by the National Collegiate Athletic Association for violations of recruiting and other rules.)

The merger in 1980 of the men's and women's departments into the present athletic department also "gave us a new perspective, a breath of fresh air," she says. Ms. Holland, who has headed the women's department, was put in charge of academic and student services for athletes and got those services expanded.

Ms. Holland, who holds a doctorate in higher education, says she firmly believes in athletes' being capable students. "I know the term student-athlete is trite to many people," she says, "but I believe in it literally."

30 Freshmen Enrolled

The career-planning program for athletes got under way on a limited basis during last year's winter quarter, with 30 freshmen enrolled. It ran for two quarters and was considered such a success that as many as 100 new freshmen will be accommodated this fall.

In the first year of the program, Ms. Millet says, the athletes are put through exercises to identify skills they already have and to determine others that they want and need to learn. The program also matches those skills with programs of study available at the university, using the center's library and other materials. That process is aimed at helping athletes choose courses and majors and then link those courses to careers.

In the second year, she says, the program will introduce the athletes to a new model of functions for jobs that Ms. Millet is helping to develop. The participants will be encouraged to begin to connect their skills to various career fields. They also will consider the kind of career internship that will be required in the next year.

In the third year, the athletes will take part in a quarter-long, unpaid internship with businesses and other

institutions. To get the internships, the athletes will be required to complete applications, present résumés, be interviewed, and use the skills they've learned for obtaining jobs. In the summer before the fourth year, the center will help them obtain paid part-time jobs in a field related to their career choice.

The fourth year will be spent in extensive practice of résumé writing, and undergoing interviews using videotapes and role playing. Each participant will wind up doing a two-hour presentation covering what's been learned.

Skills 'Discounted'

Those career-redirection techniques were first used at the center to help doctoral graduates who could not find teaching jobs to locate careers in other fields and to help unemployed or "burned out" public schoolteachers change occupations, Ms. Millet says.

The career center, she says, tries to enable athletes to recognize the skills and abilities they already have, such as motivation, organization, discipline, courage, creativity, and imagination.

"It's amazing to me how they discount the skills they already have," she says. "Think of an athlete out in front of thousands of people, keeping in his mind clearly the logistics of the game plan and functioning imaginatively in spite of the pressure, and then take those skills and transfer them to the nonathletic world." The "charismatic qualities" of many athletes also are valuable assets, she says. "But athletes don't think of it that way. They think it is superficial and valueless because of media hype."

The career-planning program was not particularly designed to bolster the academic performances of athletes, Ms. Millet says, but it has done so. Of the 30 freshmen who participated at the beginning, only two did not improve their grades significantly. "When they see that course work gives them career skills, it makes the classes more important," she says.